

Pioneer Church Fathers

N. Tjernagel

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

Tjernagel, N.. "Pioneer Church Fathers." *The Annals of Iowa* 32 (1954), 217-225.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7327>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Pioneer Church Fathers

By N. TJERNAGEL

The church of the first congregation in this section, the St. Petri Lutheran church, was erected in 1865, a little over one mile east of Story City, Iowa. The location was beautiful, with picturesque forest and stream on the west and the rolling sweep of the prairie on the east. People would come here to worship regularly from distances up to fifteen miles or more.

The first resident pioneer pastor, the Rev. Nils Amund, who served this congregation, drove across country sixty miles northwest to Badger, or thirty miles south to Ballard Grove and other distant places, to serve scattered congregations. He visited the sick and administered the sacraments in remote districts, covering a territory with the necessary ministrations which now require the care of dozens of resident ministers. He employed oxen, horses, or his own legs in his comings and goings, and necessarily spent much time and energy in reaching the different destinations.

What faith and fortitude he must have possessed to enable him to withstand the rigors of climate and the privations attendant upon such strenuous service! What an example of zeal and patience to us in our comfort-loving age when we demur at the least inconvenience, and term it quite a hardship if we soil our shoes in crossing the yard to our waiting sedans bound for church or the sick-room!

To commemorate the church as well as Pastor Amund's faithful services in this section, it has been proposed that a suitable memorial be placed on the original church site. The lasting, uplifting result of the pioneer church activity is the church's real monument it is true; but a tangible memorial in stone, with the church's name and that of its pastor and of each charter member inscribed thereon, would serve as a reminder to future generations of the work done here

by these noble advance guards of frontier civilization. The earliest of these pioneers had come here by the year 1855, and for ten years religious services were held in private homes, or the Sheldahl schoolhouse.

Church customs of yore differed in some respects from those of the present; and we assume that some mention of these matters will be of interest. The brothers Kittelson were the first regularly installed "lead-singers" during the services in the old pioneer church. They assumed positions side by side facing the congregation, intoned the melodies and led the hymn-singing throughout the service. Four-part singing had as yet not come into vogue. The singing of the melody in unison, with the voices of men and women blending in perfect measure, had its own peculiar charm in marked contrast to harmonized vocal renderings, or to those in which musical instruments play a part. It may be noted in oratorios and other productions, when voices combine in unified melodic utterance, such order produces an incomparable intensity of tonal effect.

The hymns sung by the old-timers were among the very finest the world has produced, harking back largely to the time of great spiritual stress and trial during the Reformation in northern Europe and England. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," by Martin Luther, often designated as the greatest hymn of Christendom, ranked high among the many fine hymns frequently sung of old. The more rapid ballad tempo of the lighter church melodies of a later era had as yet scarcely made itself known. The unhurried, soulful renditions of the uplifting hymns of old expressed a far greater depth of religious fervor than do many lively tunes of worship introduced later.

AN ORGAN FIRST USED IN CHURCH

After the Kittelsons came Hans Dale, whose splendid tenor rang full-throated and clear, and who guided the congregational singing with taste and precision. He was regarded as a pillar in the musical development of the community.

After a number of years an organ was installed in

the old church, which was eventually moved to Story City. Gustav Amlund, a nephew of the Rev. Nils Amlund, was the first regular organist in these parts. He performed on the new reed organ placed in the church gallery, thus providing instrumental support to the singing of the congregation. Though his fingers were mainly occupied in grasping his blacksmith sledge, they were yet supple enough to manipulate the organ keys. Mr. Dale took his position by the organ, and besides singing as usual, led the mixed choir.

In former times church finances were managed somewhat differently from present methods. Money raised for church purposes generally came in through a fairly equable contribution levy according to individual means. Funds were rarely raised by means of such devices as bazaars, socials, suppers, dinners, lotteries, or entertainments. As a consequence the minister was not overtaxed with tasks of this or that kind which scarcely concerned his work proper, and was therefore able to devote his full time to the preparation of his sermons and the spiritual care of his flock.

It is only right to record that some of the forefathers of the present generation were not always overprompt in paying their yearly church dues, and the member who was appointed collector enjoyed the thankless task of having to use all his powers of persuasion to convince each delinquent that his acknowledged share of expenses was really needed. No, it cannot be said that the pioneer fathers were all of them as generous in such matters as could have been wished; yet when we note what they accomplished in common in things of church and state, it behooves us to look well to our own achievements by comparison.

During those years there were no societies within the church organization, with the exception of the Ladies' Aid. The women heeded the admonition: "Come early, stay late," and formed quilting bees, knitted stockings, or did sewing. My mother's quilting frames were, no doubt, the busiest bits of utility that were lent around these parts. The long-suffering

husband would be sent to our house by his thrifty wife to bring these frames, and after much conversational circumlocution would finally blurt out his errand as if half ashamed. However, when in due time he discovered a new quilt—often as not a newly-sold Ladies' Aid product—decorating his bed he forgot any possible humiliation he might have suffered on account of the one-time borrowing, and contentedly snuggled underneath it.

Less self-conscious than the quilting-frame conveyor was an old neighbor woman who would knit industriously while on the way to visit her friends, or in going to meetings of the Ladies' Aid. Sometimes she was seen with an enormously long stocking in its last stages of development dangling perilously close to the ground as she walked. Our worthy pioneer mothers reserved no part of the proceeds of their handiwork for the local church, but unselfishly donated all in the interests of missionary activities among the heathen. They found that the more they gave to the cause of the missions, the more of blessedness would accrue to the congregation both materially and spiritually. Their example is a lesson to us.

Were the conversations reported of those good dames as they sat with needle and thimble in hand, at work on the warmth-giving comforters, or daintily piecing wedding-quilts, sewing and hemstitching, there would be material of interest to fill a large volume.

PERSONAL CONTROVERSIES DEVELOPED

There were those of the pioneers that were rather militant, even overbearing, but it behooves us not to question their sincerity. During a churchly discussion one of them countered the opinion of a young opponent by saying: "Does it amount to anything what you think?" However, the apparent jibe need not necessarily be construed as malevolent and uncharitable, though admittedly not a spur to continued participation in discussion by the younger element.

At a certain church meeting the pastor had occasion to assemble two opposing factions in separate groups

and happened to designate to a position on the left those with whom he disagreed. Immediately a member of this faction intimated that he chose these positions advisedly so as to stigmatize them by Scriptural inference as expressed in Matthew 25, 33: "And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left." Thus during the warmth of controversy many an ill-considered phrase slipped out, which in calmer moments would be heartily regretted, but alas! not so easily effaced from memory.

The peace-pipe smoke of the Indian represented his greatest luxury and indicated also a rite of religious significance; but when in a certain manner of emulation some among the whites chewed tobacco and spat on the floor of the sanctuary of God during services, it seemed undevotional or at least unworthy of the time and place. Later when, to promote cleanliness, there were posted on the gallery pillars of certain churches placards reading: "No Tobacco Spitting!" these warnings seemed no more becoming to their environment than the inscriptions disfiguring the noble columns of the cathedral at Cologne—inscriptions bidding all and sundry to *beware of pickpockets!*

Aside from the tobacco offense there were other shortcomings among the church-goers of old, such, for instance, as the all too common practice of rigorously excluding fresh air during services, especially in mid-winter. It happened not infrequently that persons fainted in church and had to be taken outside to revive. It was realized that fresh air was good on such occasions, but no one seemed to think of it as belonging inside of a house, much less a church. Fortunately our pioneer ancestors builded better than they knew, for the log-houses were often rather well provided with chinks through which a little outdoor air might enter; and the windows were not air-proof. These tiny openings together with the roaring fire and the ample draft in the wood-stove, set moving stagnant air and drew in life-giving oxygen.

In going to church on a winter's day the feet of those

who had driven a considerable distance were often numbed with cold; but the church-floor proved no restorer of circulation for it, too, was cold, having absorbed little or no heat from the stove which was scarcely warm itself when services began. The cold feet continued cold while the head soon swam from vitiated air and the smell of moth-balls and tobacco.

The pulpit¹ stood high and dry, and the warmth lacking in the lower strata made itself felt about the minister's head, causing him to perspire and feel discomfort from the lack of oxygen. Despite these and other material drawbacks the Word was gladly heard and the Sunday gathering was the important event of the week.

ACOUSTIC SYSTEM REVERSED

As to church interiors of that and even a later period, the excellent Athenian acoustic system was reversed. These ancients placed the speaker's stand facing the rising tiers of seats, so that all could more easily hear the orator since sound travels the more readily upwards; and the listeners could see the one who addressed them without any awkward head-tilting or neck-stretching, while he on his part could naturally and appropriately direct his gaze somewhat upward.

The church benches of pioneer days were made of heavy boards or of planks, but no one complained; and in fact they would probably have objected to cushioned seats, opera chairs, or the like, as too pretentious in a place of worship. In the humble and hardy spirit of the Pilgrim fathers they perhaps felt that true spiritual meekness was best expressed in surroundings of material simplicity.

Awkward misfortune befell a later worshiper in one of the old churches as he was leaving his place at end of the service. The old fashioned benches were fastened to the floor with rectangular iron brackets, and as our friend stepped out into the aisle one of his "tooth-pick" shoes caught in a loosened bracket with the re-

¹ The beautifully wrought pulpit and altar piece was fashioned by the Rev. Amlund himself who was an expert cabinet maker.

sult that he pitched headlong to the floor. He was considerably stunned and, being unable to rise as quickly as he had fallen, he had opportunity meanwhile to hear some very personal remarks. Many necks were craned to obtain a glimpse of him in this unfortunate pose, and commiserating expressions such as "Do you know the poor fellow?" and "What ails him, anyhow?" were freely uttered. He found it exceedingly distasteful to figure in a role of this kind, so gathered up his legs with all speed and left the assemblage amid a barrage of comment and enquiring glances.

In some of the early churches the gallery stairs had been considerably worn away, wash-board pattern, from much use. A certain gentleman had struggled up some old dilapidated stairs at a church-wedding in mid-winter and, upon turning to look back and forgetting there was ice on his heels, suddenly slid downward with much clatter and with his Prince Albert coat-tails flying. Decidedly upset, he found himself squatting in the midst of a bevy of happy bridesmaids who tittered in chorus at his mishap, thus completing his discomfiture.

The pioneer dog loved to accompany the family to church, with the result that often during worship inside there were canine encounters outside. Being used to freedom of the home, some of the dogs, when seeing anybody and everybody enter the church felt that they, too, might trot along. A man was stationed at the entrance to guard against their taking such liberties. Sometimes a rascally cur would slip in unnoticed and, if it must be told, the faces of the worshippers were not inexpressive of mirth when the dog-catcher appeared in pursuit to grab and eject his yelping victim.

On Sunday as one of the my brothers was entering the vestibule, the little fellow found himself unexpectedly astride the back of a big, strange dog. The intrusive visitor in making way for himself bored his muzzle between the boy's legs, took him on, unwillingly enough for both, but bore his unwanted burden

swiftly down the aisle to the very altar, much to the embarrassment of the kidnapped rider.

Parochial school was held in the early days after the regular terms of the public school year were over—these generally lasted six months—and would continue for weeks, even months. Many of the old-timers will remember Halvor Larson Mathre, how unselfishly he devoted himself to this unremunerative work, and with what zeal he embraced the opportunity to guide the children in his earnest, loving way.

CHRISTIAN FAITH EXEMPLIFIED

It took men with Christian faith and love sufficient to forget in large measure their own material interests to engage in such a poorly paid occupation. They, however, received a greater reward than worldly success can give, for they brought the Scriptures and principles of Christian living before the young, thus exerting a power for good, the ultimate blessings and benefits of which no man can measure or compute.

Besides Mathre other capable early teachers were: Flokketvedt, Hovland, Augestad, and Berven. Augestad was a veritable giant among his fellows and could have withstood Farmer Burns, perhaps. But he preferred to apply himself to the service of the Lord in rightly leading the "little lambs," as he fondly called the children. Though they loved him, the lambs were sometimes little imps, as the following will show.

He used to tramp for miles from his rather distant prairie home to and from school every day. He was a new-comer from overseas and had a supply of enormous woolen stockings of Norwegian make and unusual length, that had to be changed twice a day because of the deep, dewey prairie-grass he waded through. These mammoth hose were hung in the windows to dry. Will anyone blame his charges greatly if the temptation to put pieces of coal or other choice tid-bits into them proved too strong to be resisted? Augestad, possessing a saving sense of humor, showed no displeasure, but patted his property till the captive grasshoppers and other accumulated content, dropped out. He

did not frown on play, well knowing that innocent fun may well go hand in hand with seriousness, each in its place. He encouraged the children to look bright and pleasant and not to assume the hang-dog look when he sought to instill in their hearts understanding of God and His attributes. His way of teaching was both kind and persuasive, and aroused alertness and attention.

May the work of Augestad and his co-laborers remain a permanent memory in the annals of our community! And it is well to hold in continued, grateful esteem the pioneer patrons in memory of their earnest efforts for good in behalf of school and church.

Louis Kossuth Once in Des Moines

A giant hall for the shouting and singing is being built in Des Moines, the capital of Iowa, and many houses of historic interest are being torn down to accommodate its erection. This is the once fashionable section of the city, the Fourth Street area. There is a jog in Fourth street right at the top of the hill and there stood the spacious home of Dr. A. Y. Rawson, where U. S. Senator Charles Rawson was born and reared.

Ora Williams says that he never passed that old house without calling to mind a certain event. As a young reporter, he was sent by "Ret" Clarkson to get an interview for the *Iowa State Register* with a distinguished man then being entertained by Dr. Rawson.

Dr. Rawson and his visitor sat on the porch and Williams asked questions. The visitor was General Louis Kossuth, the great Hungarian patriot, then on tour of America to arouse interest in the effort of the Hungarians to achieve freedom from Austrian rule. He spoke in many cities, aroused intense enthusiasm, secured funds and bought military equipment for his home patriots.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.